

A Foundation-to-Foundation Partnership: Lessons from a Unique Pairing of Funders

**A look at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and
the Northwest Health Foundation Partnership:
Partners Investing in Nursing's Future**

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Abstract¹

While not new to the field of philanthropy, funder-to-funder partnerships have been increasingly a topic of discussion, interest, and curiosity.² Partnerships in the philanthropic sector, however, do not have a long history of discernible practice, measured benefits or results. In recent years, there has been a surge in research around partnerships, but what seem to be missing are more candid examples and lessons from specific funder-to-funder partnerships. Addressing this gap in the literature, this paper reveals findings from a process evaluation of the partnership between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Northwest Health Foundation (NWHF) vis-à-vis its Partners Investing in Nursing's Future (PIN) grantmaking program (initiated in 2005). A candid look at this partnership reveals successes and challenges, as well as what worked and what took time to work. Moreover, this paper reveals the hard work required to make this partnership evolve to create a program that has had a significant, positive impact on the field of nursing.

¹ To inform this evaluation, a literature review was conducted and is represented in a bibliography of approximately 25 resources with information related to partnering, funder-to-funder partnerships, proven and effective practices in grantmaking and the evolving role of foundations and the philanthropic sector.

² Gibson, Cynthia and Mackinnon, Anne (2009). *Funder Collaboratives Why and How Funders Work Together*. GrantCraft publication.

I. Introduction

Looking to the field of philanthropy for ideas or answers regarding funder-to-funder partnerships bears little in the way of explicit models, evidenced-based research or tried and true practices.³ This is due, in part, to the reality that the frequency with which funders work in partnership is limited; few have evaluated their partnerships and even fewer have shared publicly what they learned through their experiences.

In contrast with other funder-to-funder partnerships, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Northwest Health Foundation (NWHF) decided that an explicit process evaluation of the relationship between the two major partners in the Partners Investing in Nursing's Future (PIN) program (2005) would be an important part of monitoring the program's implementation and providing insights and lessons on how best to engage in the partnership experiment. The evaluation of the partnership relationship included data collection over five years of PIN program development and operation, through interviews, discussion groups, and surveys involving a range of stakeholders (e.g., RWJF and NWHF leadership, PIN partner leaders, staff and grantees).

³ There are a few funder-to-funder partnerships that appear to have garnered the field's attention per this evaluation's expert interviews (e.g., Local Initiative Funding Partnership Program, Community Voices, Turning Point, etc.); however, the philanthropic sector appears to be eager for more (per the literature review conducted for this evaluation).

PIN PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Partners Investing in Nursing's Future (PIN) is a partnership of the Northwest Health Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. PIN has fostered the involvement of local foundations and other organizations in activities to advance the nursing profession in their communities. Partnerships between nursing and philanthropic organizations through PIN focus on building commitment to creating collaborative solutions to the long-term challenge of ensuring a competent and experienced nurse workforce. PIN helped local, regional and state foundations develop solutions by promoting innovations to address the nursing crisis. At the end of 2010, PIN had awarded \$12.5M in grants of \$250,000 to 50 local PIN partnerships across the nation.

As PIN approached its 5th anniversary in 2010, the partners turned their attention to sharing their experiences, lessons, and emerging successful practices more broadly. The partners agreed on their mutual desire to increase their transparency and make the PIN partnership more visible to their local partners and the field of philanthropy. This paper represents an internal look at their foundation-to-foundation partnership related to¹:

- How ready were the partners?
- Who was responsible for what?
- What did the partners accomplish?
- Lessons from this unique pairing

It should be clearly stated at the onset, that PIN's stakeholders applaud the success of this initiative. Funders who had little or no previous history or interest in funding nursing workforce issues did so as a result of their participation in PIN. Regional and local workforce training programs have been developed to address nursing gaps in rural and isolated communities. Innovative strategies have been developed that target and recruit disadvantaged students for careers in health services. New teaching technology and distance learning programs have increased access and reduced the cost of nurse training programs resulting in increases in the number of nurses and accredited nursing programs. The RWJF-NWHF union has also created a valuable model of what is needed to develop a productive funder-to-funder partnership. This paper represents an analysis, synthesis and sharing of findings from the process evaluation of that RWJF-NWHF partnership.

PARTNERS

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For 40 years RWJF has brought experience, commitment, and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, RWJF expects to make a difference in your lifetime.

For more information, visit www.rwjf.org.

Northwest Health Foundation

Northwest Health Foundation (NWHF) is an independent foundation committed to advancing, supporting and promoting the health of the people of Oregon and southwest Washington. NWHF focuses on issues of health and health care in their region, seeking concrete solutions to today's health problems while advocating to prevent tomorrow's. NWHF is guided by the belief that social justice and equitable treatment are essential building blocks of a healthy society and that sustainable social change requires collaborative strategies, robust partnerships, and long-term investment. The foundation is committed to community engagement to solve problems, and believes that transparency and accountability are critical elements of their work.

For more information, visit www.nwhf.org.

II. How Ready Were the Partners?

A. The Decision to Partner: A Desire to Leverage Impact

In an effort to address the threat posed to our nation's health care system as a result of more than decade of nursing workforce shortages, RWJF and NWHF came together to create PIN. The vision and passion RWJF and NWHF share for improving health and health care led to their meeting at a Grantmakers in Health Conference (GIH) in 2005.

At the time, RWJF's nursing portfolio was led by a nationally recognized champion of nursing issues. This program officer was and continues to be considered an important leader in nursing, responsible for leading and maintaining RWJF's nursing program. In 1997, at the time of the arrival of RWJF's program officer, RWJF was funding two programs devoted to nurse programming, The *RWJF Executive Nurse Fellows* program and *Colleagues in Caring: Regional Collaboratives for Nursing Work Force* Development.⁴ As of December 2011 there have been close to \$350M worth of programs devoted to the nursing workforce, including Transforming Care at the Bedside, Quality and Safety Education in Nursing and the Interdisciplinary Nursing Quality Research Initiative. Partners Investing in Nursing was an effort to include the many foundations seeking partnership with RWJF at the time. Currently, RWJF is funding the *Center to Champion Nursing in America* to raise the visibility and significance of nursing workforce issues, and build evidence and seek solutions to address nursing workforce shortages and the nurse's role in high-quality care. *RWJF's Initiative on the Future of Nursing* has created a Campaign for Action with the goal of fostering adoption of those recommendations presented in a RWJF supported Institute of Medicine Study, titled *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*. The Campaign is meant to bring all of RWJF's past and current efforts in nursing, and the efforts of many other

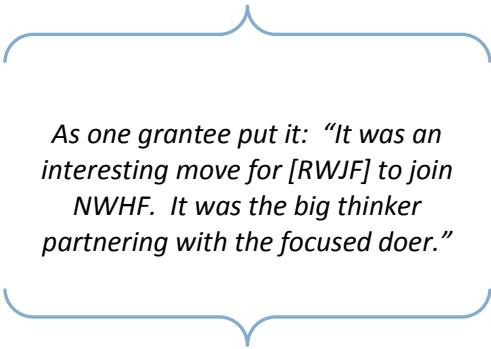
⁴ Another nursing career development program, *Ladders in Nursing Careers Program*, ended in August 1997.

organizations, together to create solutions to improve the health care system using nurses more effectively.

Representing NWHF were NWHF's president and [then] director of strategic initiative, both highly regarded within their region for the strength of their health care advocacy and capacity building success. Since 2001, nursing had been a part of NWHF's portfolio and became a major initiative in 2005. Its initiative, *Investing in a Healthy Future: Strategies to Address the Nursing Shortage*, focused on making a long-term and strategic investment in the health of the region by growing a stable, skilled nursing workforce ready to meet the needs of the new century.

Over the course of five years (2003-2007), NWHF funded 35 organizations for a total of \$3.9 million. Ultimately, the initiative was successful in terms of providing the framework for continued efforts in nursing as well as in other health professions, and in using similar strategies and activities with other kinds of partnerships and collaborations. NWHF's initiative also demonstrated a model of high engagement philanthropy, and identified a number of lessons learned and strategies to consider as PIN was being developed. These included foundation/partner collaboration, leveraging and lengthening investments, convening and facilitating projects, technical assistance and coaching, foundation staff as representatives/agents of dissemination, and the need for policy advocacy. Generally speaking, one reason to partner is to leverage the resources, capacities, and expertise of two entities such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For RWJF and NWHF, this desire for leveraged impact was the centripetal force pulling these two funders together. Each saw opportunity and strengths in the other sufficient to suggest that by uniting they would have a greater likelihood of impacting nursing's workforce issues in a deep and meaningful way.

The RWJF-NWHF partnership represented an opportunity for NWHF with several potential benefits, including: access to resources from a foundation with a deep history, credibility, and experience in achieving program and policy impact; broader national reach; and greater potential to impact NWHF's interest in addressing nursing issues. In addition, the partnership represented a unique opportunity to showcase the NWHF's well-earned reputation and approach



As one grantee put it: "It was an interesting move for [RWJF] to join NWHF. It was the big thinker partnering with the focused doer."

to philanthropy that featured a closer engagement with the community partners in achieving desired program and policy changes. In RWJF, NWHF would acquire a well-known, highly respected and well-resourced national funder with a long, credible history of working on issues closely aligned with NWHF's. Moreover, as a newer health foundation, NWHF wanted to learn from the successful experiences of RWJF in implementing national program initiatives. NWHF also had an explicit desire to bring its own passionate approach of engaged philanthropy⁵ to its partnership with RWJF as a distinctive feature of PIN that could eventually serve as a model for the philanthropic community.

From RWJF's perspective, a partnership with NWHF was regarded as a way to leverage RWJF's mission impact by tackling important issues in a new way. Such a partnership offered RWJF an opportunity for more outreach and contact at a local level with funders that might not typically participate in a nursing initiative and/or be capable of a partnering with a larger national foundation like RWJF. Moreover, RWJF saw NWHF as possessing the requisite skills and capacities less accessible in a larger foundation like RWJF. These included skills in providing on-the-ground technical assistance and in developing close and trusting funder-to-community partner working relationships required to optimize results at the regional

⁵ Engaged philanthropy, as written about by Judith Woodruff in PIN Point: the newsletter of Partners' Investing in Nursing Future, Volume 2, Number 2, Summer 2010, can be defined as an open source operating system for collaboration. For PIN, the notion was that funders (RWJF, NWHF) and grantee partnerships (local funders, project leaders) would each come to their respective PIN tables as collaborators—vibrant, active, tinkering, modifying, adding, deleting, changing, and patching—ensuring the outcome is better than the original idea.

and local levels. The PIN partnership model envisioned would provide opportunities for RWJF program staff to have more regional, local and on-the-ground access to community partners.


Both partners were excited about the synergy that would be produced by working together to have a greater impact on nursing issues locally, regionally, and nationally. Deciding to partner was easy compared to the challenge of actually forming an unprecedented partnership between two unarguably different funders. One question that remained: were they ready?

B. While Still Forming the Partnership, PIN is Launched


Born out of a spark between one of the nation's largest private foundations, RWJF, and a much smaller and decidedly regional foundation, NWHF, the possibility of funding an initiative to address nursing's workforce issues became concrete as RWJF identified flexible grant resources that could support it.

The window of opportunity to plan, develop, coordinate, prepare, and launch a major national initiative that was sufficiently compelling to meet the criteria of both funders was short (less than four months due to the RWJF's funding and payout cycles). This funding opportunity had to be taken, lest the window be closed for some indefinite time.

While both funders acknowledged concerns about planning, developing a partnership and operational agreement, and building staffing capacities for the implementation of a multi-state, national initiative in such a short period of time, they moved forward with PIN. Working from a strengths-based approach to their union, the variations in



"The drive to push to the get the money out the door and get this thing started was a relentless driver that has pushed due diligence protocols to the side."



"We moved forward primarily motivated by our passion and desire for this to work."

each funder's history, size, past experiences, and varying capacity were all seen as assets that each foundation brought to the table.

In addition, according to the evaluation data outlined in Table 1, the partners met many of the requirements for forming a highly effective partnership. The conditions for a successful partnership, largely thought to include the components summarized in Table 1, were supported by both the literature and key informant interviews conducted as part of this evaluation. Interviews and surveys conducted with RWJF and NWHF during the first year of the partnership's formation also suggested, ultimately, that the partners were in the partnership for the right reasons.

Table 1⁶

Conditions for Successful Partnership
✓ Partners have a similar approach to grantmaking
✓ Partners have similar perceptions of the specific societal problem or need the partnership is designed to address
✓ Partnership has a clear theory for how its grantmaking will affect change.
✓ Partnership has a coherent sense of the role of the partners in the partnership.
✓ Partnership strengthens the capacity of communities to solve their own problems.
✓ Partners have similar perceptions with regard to how to support grantees.
✓ Partners have a shared vision with regard to the role of partnering foundations in enacting change.
✓ Partners have shared organizational values.
✓ Partnership effectively unites two organizations of different organizational cultures.
✓ Partners have personal connections or relationships within the partnership.

⁶ These conditions were drawn most directly from: Mattessich, Paul W., Martha Murray-Close and Barbara R. Monsey. *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*. (2nd Edition) Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. Saint Paul, MN. May, 2004; Backer, Thomas, E. (1999). *Innovation In Context: New Foundation Approaches to Evaluation, Collaboration and Best Practices*. Human Interaction Research Institute: A study conducted for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation; and, Isaacs, Stephen L. and Rodgers, John H. (2001). "Partnership Among National Foundations Between Rhetoric and Reality." Volume 4 (2001) of *To Improve Health and Healthcare: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Anthology*. In addition, these sources were complemented by expert interviews conducted by the evaluators in 2010.

RWJF and NWHF staff members had mutual admiration for each other and recognized that each partner had critical expertise and experiences that could be brought to bear as they explored this new relationship.⁷ Yet, the PIN leaders did have to negotiate on a number of issues to get to what staff of each foundation thought was needed to prepare for their partnership, as outlined in the sections that follow.⁸

III. Issues to be Addressed

A. MOU

Negotiation is key to all partnerships and this partnership was no exception. One example relates to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that specified proposed partnership roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes. NWHF sought to formalize the partnership and codify their partnership relationship through a MOU. The reality of the nature of the relationship between the two funders, as evidence by the quote below,⁹ led the NWHF to push for this MOU:

There is “power imbalance” right now in our partnership; if we don’t do something to re-balance conditions...fix the little things in the collaboration/partnership, for example the levels of bureaucratic approvals required before things can get approved and done, I am not sure how we will move forward toward realizing our objectives.

According to RWJF and NWHF, the drafted MOU reflected the requirements of a funder-to-funder partnership around such a grantmaking initiative. Moreover, it reflected best practices in the field of

⁷ According to perception survey data collected through this evaluation, each partner rated the other as having the expertise and experience necessary for this partnership.

⁸ As evidenced in confidential interviews with the partnership leaders during the early days of the launch of PIN.

⁹ Permission was granted by the NWHF to print this quote.

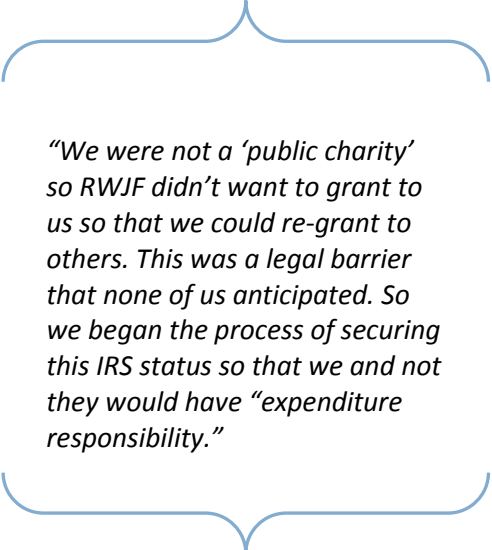
philanthropy, passed muster in the legal department of NWHF and, generally speaking, was fairly standard in form/format. Yet, RWJF was uncertain about moving the MOU forward.

Upon reflection, RWJF stated the reasons for this hesitation as two-fold: 1) a partnership agreement of this nature would require considerable departmental reviews within RWJF, such that it would detract from the day-to-day work of PIN's launch; (2) simultaneous to the MOU drafting, the partners were challenged by their quick start and a few miscommunications early in PIN's launch.¹⁰ Although frustrated by the RWJF decision with regard to the MOU, NWHF continued with its day-to-day activities of forming the partnership and launching the grantmaking mechanism.

B. Shifting Fiscal Responsibilities

In addition to not moving the MOU forward for approval, it was at about this same time that RWJF reconsidered another decision that would influence the partnership early on. Specifically, RWJF decided that it would retain budgetary control for issuing awards to local grantees despite an earlier understanding that NWHF would carry out this function. RWJF's reason was that NWHF did not yet have the appropriate IRS legal status to re-grant monies from RWJF to grantees.¹¹

From NWHF's perspective, the appropriate paperwork to obtain the necessary IRS status had already been submitted and would be sufficiently resolved in a timely way for the



"We were not a 'public charity' so RWJF didn't want to grant to us so that we could re-grant to others. This was a legal barrier that none of us anticipated. So we began the process of securing this IRS status so that we and not they would have 'expenditure responsibility.'"

¹⁰ As evidenced in confidential interviews with the partnership leaders.

¹¹ In order for the NWHF to carry out its ideal, conceived-of PIN function e.g., full grantmaking and budgetary controls, the RWJF required NWHF to change its legal IRS status so as to alleviate RWJF from expenditure responsibility for each local grant.

launch of PIN. RWJF's caution demonstrated the potential differences emerging between the two partners.

According to RWJF, the first cycle of PIN was launched as a one-year pilot with RWJF making the grants to PIN sites, with plans to revisit this partnership's fiscal structure within the first year of the partnership. As a result, the funders were not in the partnership relationship at the launch of PIN that either had originally envisioned. In keeping with their stated intent, RWJF revised the partnership structure after one year by passing along the grantmaking function to the NWHF. However RWJF's ongoing grantmaking requirements did not foster a sense of partnership, as NWHF (like other grantees) had to apply annually to RWJF for a grant to then regrant to the PIN partnerships.

C. Differences in Culture

Simultaneous to the announcement of the decision regarding fiscal controls, the external evaluators witnessed¹² trust between the two funders erode as they worked side-by-side in the field, conducting site visits and interacting with potential regional and local grantees during the grantee selection process. Each perceived that the other was not being true to the partnership. Interviews revealed perceptions that the NWHF staff were criticizing RWJF for the pressure to launch PIN in too narrow a timeframe and for its lack of understanding of the requirements of such a launch. Further interviews revealed RWJF staff's perceptions that NWHF did not have the necessary and appropriate staff capacity in place.

With no MOU in place and the RWJF decision with regard to shifting fiscal controls, the two funders appeared to be taking a step back in their partnership's formation. While none of these challenges alone

¹² Through a series of confidential interviews with each of the partners.

would be sufficient evidence to suggest the partners were not ready;¹³ combined, they suggested that indeed the partners were less than fully ready when they started. What appeared to be at the root of these two funders' challenges (e.g., MOU, fiscal controls, related rising tensions, etc.) were differences in organizational culture. The quick pace at which the partners moved forward hampered their start and created issues that took time to resolve (as described in later sections). What these partners needed most was time upfront to plan, build trust and rapport, and learn to work together.

IV. Implementation

A. The Launch of PIN

Approximately four months after the partnership was formed, PIN was implemented. There were clear and obvious differences between the two partners, but this was acknowledged and accepted as a given at the onset. RWJF had been in existence for nearly 40 years, operated with a staff of nearly 200 and in 2005, issued 960 grants totaling \$370M. However, RWJF did not have the designated staff to fulfill the on-the-ground engagement required for PIN with its multitude of funders and partners at the local level. On the other hand, NWHF had been in existence for less than 10 years, operated with a staff of 14, three of which were dedicated to PIN along with NWHF leadership and management. In 2005, NWHF funded 3.5 million dollars in grants. This resource and size differential was less formidable to the partners,¹⁴ given that neither expected the partnership terms, roles and responsibilities to be based on achieving a balance on all dimensions of resources and power. The assumption was that they would work on achieving a distribution of power in the management of PIN over time.

¹³ Among recognized measures of readiness are the following: shared organizational values, critical expertise and experience, vehicles for maximizing strengths, similar perceptions about how best to support grantees, and a shared sense of the primary purpose of the initiative.

¹⁴ As evidenced in the confidential interviews and the partnership survey.

Table 2 illustrates who was responsible for what, at the outset of PIN. As it illustrates, while there were some clear roles and responsibilities for each partner, there were also areas of overlap where the roles and responsibilities were less clear.

Table 2. **Partners' Responsibilities**¹⁵

RWJF	NWHF
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Resource commitment (\$, staff) ✓ Decision making authority (\$) ✓ Branding and marketing of the initiative ✓ Communications between partners ✓ Evaluation of the partnership ✓ Accountability for the partnership's work ✓ Knowledge management ✓ Dissemination of learnings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Resource commitment (full-time, designated staff) ✓ Decision making authority (supports to grantees) ✓ Branding and marketing of the initiative ✓ Communications between partners ✓ Evaluation TA to grantees; outcomes evaluation ✓ Accountability for the partnership's work ✓ Knowledge management ✓ Dissemination of learnings ✓ Coordination of PIN's grantmaking activities ✓ Communications with grantees ✓ Building new relationships with local strategic partners


¹⁵ This table is a qualitative listing of the division of labor and balance of power between the two funders, according to a survey issued to the primary representatives of the partnership early on in PIN's implementation. The indicators used to measure the balance of power were derived, in part, from an extensive literature review across the sources identified in the bibliography to this paper. These indicators were critical drivers in this evaluation.

RWJF was responsible for the partner award resources and fiscal controls in PIN's first cycle of awards. NWHF, on the other hand, was responsible for communication with all local partners and the coordination of PIN grantmaking activities. Both partners were equally responsible for communications between themselves and likewise, they were to share in responsibilities around accountability, evaluation, knowledge management and dissemination of lessons learned. The division of labor was less clear around decision-making authority, branding, and the shared responsibility of evaluation, knowledge management and dissemination of lessons learned. [These are further elaborated on in the section that follows].


While the partners appeared to accept the general imbalance of power in various dimensions of their working relationship, arriving at the *right balance* in each dimension was the more challenging learning process, which required time to get right.

It also required a willingness to endure short-term frustrations

with the belief that trial and error and, most importantly, time would strengthen the working relationship, further build trust, and enhance the partners' communications and their decisions through the implementation of PIN.



An early observation of one of the grantees: *"I feel there is a struggle in the partnership. It seems that RWJF wants to cede control to NWHF with continual references to the NWHF. We all know where the money is coming from and there seems to be a struggle between the two partners."*



During the implementation of PIN, local partners were acutely empathetic to challenges between the two PIN leadership partners with regard to the imbalance of power. Their awareness and empathy came from their own experiences and knowledge regarding funders' attempts at partnering with other funders. It also came from their past and current observations of their experiences at the local level, whereas PIN partners, they attempted to create, form, and shape funding partnerships and

collaborations. In general, PIN partners were not surprised that foundations, unaccustomed as they are to partnering, would face challenges similar to those they themselves encountered.

B. Challenged to Define Roles and Responsibilities Over Time

Among the more difficult challenges of the PIN partnership was the need for greater time, effort, attention, compromise, and negotiation upfront to navigate roles, responsibilities, and the balance of power. The partnership evaluation identified three areas, in particular, that were ongoing areas of sensitivity for the partners:

1. Decision-making authority
2. Branding and marketing of the initiative
3. Evaluation, knowledge management, and learning

B.1 Decision Making Authority

As previously mentioned, each of the partners was acutely aware of who controlled the primary resources for this initiative—RWJF had significantly greater financial resources and investments in PIN. To RWJF, this reality brought with it a definite level of decision-making authority in the partnership with NWHF and an added layer of accountability and responsibility to RWJF's Board.

On the other hand, NWHF's board, while applauding the national recognition, prestige, and accolades received for their partnership with RWJF, had less ownership in PIN. The program had been structured in much the same way as a donor restricted fund within a community foundation. As such, the NWHF board knew that the program management and decisions were being made with the assistance and support of experienced staff (at NWHF and RWJF), and with an exemplary national advisory committee.

The role of the NWHF board became one of fiduciary review and approval of the program grants on an annual basis.

The earliest examples of RWJF's assumptions regarding its decision making authority manifested in its management of the PIN planning process and start-up of PIN: not signing the MOU and shifting fiscal controls to itself as outlined previously. In addition to the earlier cited examples, RWJF's flow of investment in PIN, at multiple points during PIN, expanded the size and scope of PIN in ways not originally anticipated by NWHF.

RWJF placed pressure on NWHF staff¹⁶ to create marketing and application materials, design technical assistance strategies, and manage PIN's launch in a short window of time. At RWJF, as soon as PIN was approved, standard organizational departmental grant and budget review and processing protocols and procedures were set in motion. According to the RWJF, the decision to move PIN quickly was supported at all levels of the organization.

As the partners grew more comfortable in their roles, through regular meetings of the partnership leaders and conversations that were described as candid and forthright, RWJF began to relinquish some of its control, allowing NWHF to assume more decision-making authority around components of PIN. While the issues of decision-making authority, power, and control were not fully resolved, the funders settled into patterns that were more comfortable for each funder than at the outset of PIN. The NWHF staff invested considerable time and effort to improve their project management responsibilities. The RWJF lead program officers made considerable effort to improve their positive role, presence, and

¹⁶ Per confidential interviews.

partnership efforts with NWHF. These changes took considerable time and effort by both sides and the improvement was noticeable to PIN local partners and other outside observers.

B.2 Branding and Marketing

The partners also took some time to work out their respective responsibilities for the branding and marketing of the initiative. In early discussions regarding the PIN partnership, RWJF expressed concern over the branding and marketing of PIN. Unlike RWJF's historical experience with more conventional partnering models, RWJF feared that NWHF's high level of visibility and interaction with local partners on the ground would limit RWJF's visibility as a key partner and the resource engine of the initiative. This did not occur¹⁷.

Local partners' perceptions of partnership roles and functions suggest there was no question *who* the partners were or *what* each brought to the table. Despite having more frequent and direct interaction with NWHF, PIN partners clearly and easily associated PIN with RWJF's brand. They were keenly aware that it was RWJF financial resources that supported and complemented their local grant investments and it was the RWJF brand that drew attention and fueled interest in nursing workforce issues among their local stakeholders. In general, having a grant from RWJF and working with them on an issue of national concern was regarded as a major coup by local philanthropic, business, civic, and health care institutions. In fact, RWJF's brand among partners and stakeholders played a major role in getting local players to partner, invest, and elevate nursing workforce issues as a (local or regional) funding priority.¹⁸

Over time, the partners recognized that branding and marketing the partners as distinct from the partnership was not necessary—and particularly not for RWJF. Once this shift in perception solidified,

¹⁷ Per partnership interviews and surveys and interviews with grantees.

¹⁸ Per interviews and discussion groups with grantees.

the partners demonstrated greater unity and more of a common voice—a partnership voice. Moreover, the tone of the partnership changed. As NWHF staff readily points out:

When RWJF realized they were not losing their brand they relaxed [on this issue.] But, [it was the] hundreds of hours of working at partnership tasks, day in and day out, cycle after cycle [that] built [the partners] trust and rapport. This was hard work.

Further, the partners became more transparent and demonstrated increased comfort and confidence in sharing their challenges and even airing their mistakes as partners. At the 2009 annual PIN partner conference, PIN leaders from each of the foundations engaged in a discussion modeled after a popular daytime television format (Oprah). During this discussion session, the leaders of PIN answered questions and spoke candidly about their perceptions of each other and their experiences working as partners. The response from local partners was overwhelmingly positive. When the primary partners were willing to discuss obstacles in their own relationship each of the partnerships at the local level began to feel free to ask for help. Per staff at the NWHF, the veil between the two program partners and the partners at the local level was dropped and the local partners were encouraged to share what they learned with each other.

Over time, according to RWJF, the focus on PIN marketing and branding became more of a discussion of marketing and public relations regarding PIN and the partnership as a whole, rather than of individual partners. This shift was a positive mark of progress for the partnership. Less concerned with their own foundations as part of PIN, the partners became more focused on PIN's image externally.

B.3 Evaluation, Knowledge Management, and Lessons Learned

Two teams conducted the evaluation of PIN: one for the RWJF/NWHF partnership evaluation that looked at the partnership's impact on the respective foundations; and a second (through a subcontract from NWHF) that looked at both PIN's impact on local partnership implementation, and the PIN impact at the local level (see the Appendix for more detail).

Success in doing these evaluations was hampered by the lack of a mechanism for sharing and disseminating findings *within* the partnership, and across these two levels of evaluation. In addition, there was a lack of communication between the two teams performing the different parts of the evaluation.

Arguably, a more coordinated evaluation effort might have served as a vehicle for better and more meaningful data collection connecting the RWJF/NWHF partnership more explicitly to PIN program impact and the local level results. From the partnership evaluator's perspective, the result of this lack of a coordinated effort was a less than ideal level of data sharing (internally) and reporting (externally). Despite several attempts to improve the siloed nature of the evaluation, from the partnership evaluators' perspective, the lack of coordination was never resolved.

C. Communication was Critical

Challenged by some of its partnership conditions and the context of its evolution, the leaders of PIN worked tirelessly through frequent and regular meetings and candid conversations to address the issues of the partnership. Decision making authority; marketing and branding; evaluation, knowledge

management and dissemination of findings, were each components of the RWJF-NWHF partnership that took time and attention to evolve—with some components yielding better results than others.

In retrospect, what each of the partners agree on is that greater planning, better pacing of the partnership launch and more time and attention to these components of the partnership *earlier* could have resulted in more effective partnership relations and potentially better results, sooner.

Differences in organizational culture appear to have had an effect on the partnership as it was forming, being launched and implemented. Reoccurring themes in the evaluation of the partnership suggest that deliberate time and diligent attention focused on organizational culture vis-à-vis the partnership conditions were important to the partnership's formation and effective implementation. While PIN was challenged by its start-up and the organizational differences of the two partners, the leaders of PIN persisted—yielding numerous, intended, positive results.

V. What Did the Partners Accomplish?¹⁹

A. Partnership Successes²⁰

Undeniably, an examination of PIN has the power to unleash a wealth of information and highly valuable lessons relevant to the field of philanthropy, particularly around the formation of funder-to-funder partnerships. While PIN's success can be assessed against many criteria, there appear to be a few points of consensus, gathered through the process evaluation, regarding PIN's accomplishments:

B. PIN Demonstrated High-Quality Grantmaking

The PIN partners developed and implemented a high-quality grant program. Local partners reported²¹ being impressed by the speed with which the initiative was launched, its effectiveness in making awards and getting a sizable number of projects off the ground and the thoroughness of its program components and supports for partners (e.g., site visits, conferences, and focus group sessions). Working in partnership, PIN:

- ✓ Focused on tackling nursing workforce issues
- ✓ Maximized the strengths of each funder
- ✓ Formed a high quality, national advisory committee
- ✓ Outlined effective grantmaking guidelines, processes, selection criteria, and protocols
- ✓ Developed a durable process and timetable for grantmaking decisions across two funders through five rounds of funding
- ✓ Designed and implemented a two-tier (outcome and process) evaluation

¹⁹ In addition to interviews and surveys of PIN's partners (RWJF and NWHF), this evaluation included surveys of PIN's National Advisory Council and interviews and surveys with PIN grantees exploring their perceptions of the results/outcomes of PIN.

²⁰ An overview of findings from the process evaluation study components B and C.

²¹ Per surveys of grantees as well as annual discussion groups.

- ✓ Provided more than 50 projects with technical assistance and capacity building
- ✓ Used data to make continuous improvements, finding ways to do things more efficiently and effectively
- ✓ Resulted in notable outcomes for all stakeholders (e.g., new investments in nursing programs from new contributors as well as new activity in the field, etc.²²)

C. PIN Engaged Local Funders in Supporting Nursing Workforce Issues.

As an innovative and powerful approach to philanthropy, PIN demonstrated considerable success with engaging philanthropy at the local level (with NWHF carrying out its role and function in working with funders/partners at the local level). Engaged philanthropy has been defined in PIN's newsletter as an open source operating system for collaboration, particularly among foundations engaged in grantmaking. For PIN, the notion was that top level partners (RWJF, NWHF) and local partners (local funders, project leaders) would each come to their respective PIN tables as collaborators—vibrant, active, tinkering, modifying, adding, deleting, changing and patching—ensuring the outcome is better than the original idea.²³

Overall, NWHF's modeling and practice of engaged philanthropy principles with local and regional partners was regarded as an important success for PIN. By all accounts, one of PIN's greatest accomplishments was its engagement of funders not typically engaged in nursing and/or workforce issues. PIN successfully recruited new funders, workforce representatives, academics, educators, and health care providers (to name a few) to tackle a social problem in a collaborative manner.

²² For data on outcomes, please reference PIN Outcomes Evaluator's findings.

²³ Woodruff, Judith. PIN Point: the newsletter of Partners' Investing in Nursing Future, Volume 2, Number 2, Summer 2010.

The *sheer number* of funders engaged throughout the first five years of PIN (approximately 220) is a testament to the great success of PIN both in terms of its impact on the field of nursing but also as a model of engaged philanthropy at work. The work of these local projects was unique, influenced by diverse community engagement and focused on strategies unlike any that the individual partnering entities could likely achieve on their own.²⁴ Many PIN partners, who had never worked on nursing or health care issues before, attributed successes in forming local partnerships, developing program innovations to meet local nursing needs, and their commitment to sustaining programs beyond PIN funding to the practices of engaged philanthropy.

D. PIN Improved Nursing Educational Infrastructure on a Local Level.

While the impact on nursing is not the subject of the process evaluation, anecdotally partners and the initiative's national advisors (the National Advisory Committee) report improvements in nursing educational infrastructure at the local level as one example of PIN's many accomplishments.

Specifically, according to surveys conducted with PIN's stakeholders, local improvements made through the initiative in the area of bolstering the nursing educational infrastructure include the following:

- Strengthened nursing education and training infrastructure at the community level (in funded communities).
- Increased the quantity and the quality of nursing education opportunities available to interested students.

Specifically, partners report that the initiative resulted in a stronger nursing education infrastructure at the community level. Additional outcomes of the PIN investments will be well-documented by the outcomes evaluation team. This evaluation encompasses five years of grantmaking as well as the outcomes of the 50 PIN projects.

²⁴ Per interviews with a select sample of grantees in 2010 across PIN cohorts.

VI. Lessons from this Unique Pairing

A. Partnering and Engaged Philanthropy

There are many views in the literature about partnerships. Tom David of the California Wellness Foundation writes that partners can be categorized along a continuum of collaborative activities “ranging from informal/unstructured exchanges to formally incorporated joint ventures.”²⁵ Bob Hughes, formerly a vice president of the RWJF, defines partnership as “a particular form of a collaboration characterized by formal relationships that involve investment of money or other tangible resources... [Or,] the most structured, formal end of the collaboration continuum.”²⁶ And, still others define partnerships as a *form* of collaboration: “the sharing of resources, responsibilities, and risks to achieve a common purpose.”²⁷ While the definitions of partnership versus collaboration vary, it appears that across the literature, there are a series of common characteristics that may be used to define them. These are as follows:

- ✓ Complementary vision, values, and preparedness
- ✓ Shared risk, responsibility, rewards
- ✓ Commitment of time and resources
- ✓ Mutual cooperation, learning, and accountability for results
- ✓ Clear protocols for decision making
- ✓ Open and clear communication
- ✓ Trust, reciprocity
- ✓ A plan for sustainability

²⁵ David, Tom (1998). Partnership and Leadership. The California Wellness Foundation.

²⁶ Hughes, Robert (2005). Philanthropies Working Together: Myths and Realities. The Foundation Center.

²⁷ Himmelman, Arthur T. (2004). Collaboration for a Change. Definitions, Decision-making models, Roles, and Collaboration Process Guide.

As outlined throughout this paper, the RWJF-NWHF partnership successfully achieved most, if not all, of these characteristics.

PIN's accomplishments are considerable and include: high-quality grantmaking, engaged philanthropy at a local level, and significant local outcomes. Even though PIN leadership at the NWHF expressed disappointment that their vision of engaged philanthropy was not fully realized in their relationship with the RWJF, the partnership proved rewarding for both parties in different ways. Early meetings between the funders revealed that considerable work remained to form a partnership between them consistent with the model of engaged philanthropy that the NWHF had used since 1997; but NWHF admits to having high expectations and great ambition as to what this opportunity would yield for NWHF, RWJF, the partnering foundations and the field of philanthropy. While this concept appealed to RWJF, their grantmaking practice had long taken staff away from on-the-ground management of the issues. Big picture health policy and program design that framed national issues had become their signature grantmaking style and it required focus and dependence on professional, credentialed, expert staff, capable of marketing RWJF's brand to key health care decision makers. While intrigued by the engaged philanthropy approach RWJF senior leadership did not view this partnership as an opportunity to experiment with their philanthropic model.

While RWJF may not have intended its partnership with NWHF to highlight and feature engaged philanthropy as a model for foundation to foundation partnership, it is clear that it did intend to learn about how to better engage in partnerships, more generally, for the future. RWJF staff saw its willingness to partner with NWHF as an opportunity to explore strategic practices in partnering that could inform the effectiveness of its grant investments. RWJF senior management saw the partnership as an experiment, in part, to expand its historical model of managing national efforts through a

“national program office”²⁸ often located within an academic institution, to an arrangement with another foundation as the management partner. In this context, RWJF hoped to learn more about its institutional, administrative, programming, staffing and general grantmaking philosophical strengths and weaknesses in partnering with other foundation colleagues.

RWJF considers itself a changed funder because of this experience. RWJF has captured many insights regarding its institutional capacity and ability to adapt its national program office model²⁹ to accommodate a foundation to foundation partnership. The experience reinforced the importance of setting aside sufficient time to learn about prospective partner’s administrative, fiscal, and other organizational capacities as a part of a comprehensive planning process. This process evaluation may yield insights that will inform RWJF’s future approach to foundation to foundation partnerships.

NWHF was pleased with the impact of the “engaged philanthropy” *framework* as it is being used with the 50 partnerships across the United States. While the partnership between the foundation partners may not have yielded major transformative change between the RWJF and NWHF, the impact on the field of philanthropy is recognized by both.

Additionally, NWHF gained great insight into the challenges of managing a national initiative, particularly one with more than 500 organizational partners spread over 37 states and the territories of the Pacific. NWHF experienced working with national consultants for communications, meeting planning and organizational development. NWHF’s visibility as a regional foundation with both specific expertise in the field of nursing and philanthropy increased. Likewise, the ability to form lasting and meaningful

²⁸ National Program Offices (NPO).

²⁹ RWJF had a history of funding National Program Offices (NPOs) which are program management intermediaries that perform certain functions for the foundation including grants management, payment pass-through, technical assistance and reporting functions. In general RWJF engaged non-profit entities, typically universities to provide this service function.

partnerships with a variety of organizations has made NWHF a viable partner for many other health initiatives and many other national foundations.

B. Final Thoughts

In retrospect, the two funders agree that PIN and their relationship was well worth the investment—resulting in important and significant outcomes, and producing lessons with the potential to impact the field philanthropy and nursing for years to come.

Among the take-ways that each funder believes could have furthered their goals, enhanced their relationship and resulted in deeper meaning and impact for their work are the following:

- 1. Partnership formation requires the attention of experienced and time-dedicated foundation program staff as well as foundation executive staff.**
- 2. Deliberate time and attention in a planning stage of sufficient duration are critical to goal and expectation setting as well as outcomes and impact planning.**
- 3. Negotiated roles and responsibilities, and an up-front understanding of the power issues as they relate to the partnership are critical to program design, strategy and implementation.**

Reputation, credibility, and name brand have the potential to draw considerable resources and attention to partnerships that intend to address both national and local issues. Knowledge management, evaluation, and dissemination/communications are powerful vehicles for generating

broader support and deeper, more sustainable results. They thus require an explicitly coordinated function across the partnership, the grantmaking, and connected to outcomes.

As the RWJF-NWHF partnership staff reflects on their work together, the message they share with the field is that “all partnerships are transformational, all are hard work, and even less than perfect ones can be productive and rewarding.”

Formal foundation partnerships are rare and funders’ philosophies, cultures and structures are unique. As a result, careful planning, dialogue, and transparency are paramount. Regardless of the seemingly endless effort required to form them, funder-to-funder partnerships and partnerships reflective of engaged philanthropy are well worth the time, energy, and investment as they have the power and potential to make a profound difference beyond what individual funders can achieve on their own—impact that is much needed to build capacity across the nonprofit sector to meet the growing social needs and economic demands of a society and/or populations in distress.

APPENDIX

PIN's Process Evaluation Design

For PIN, the evaluation operated on three levels:

1. One evaluation focused on the partnership between RWJF and NWHF and how the partnership of PIN would impact their respective foundations (RWJF/NWHF).³⁰
2. The second evaluation was focused around the impact of the PIN program (including financial resources, technical assistance and collaboration) on the individual partnership sites across the country (PIN Impact).³¹
3. The third evaluation effort is at the local level, analyzing the outcomes of the individual projects (Partners Impact).³²

While a comprehensive evaluation model was not created prior to the launch of the PIN program, the latter two pieces were in place from the beginning. The first of which provided the evidence for this paper. Specifically, the PIN partnership evaluators³³ in collaboration with the PIN partner representatives³⁴ created an evaluation framework to assess the quality, strength, and outcomes of the relationship between RWJF and NWHF. Specifically, the process evaluation examined the experience-base, readiness, structure, and design of the partnership; the process and quality of its implementation;

³⁰ The scope of this paper is a result of the evaluation of the RWJF/NWHF partnership only, and was started approximately six months after the beginning of the program. Given the start of this evaluation, after PIN's planning period, some data were collected *after* the program was launched.

³¹ NWHF hired an evaluation team that gathered data regarding the impact of PIN on the local level and provided technical assistance and training to each partnership in the area of program evaluation. The PIN Impact evaluation assisted the partnership in functioning in a continuous learning mode resulting in a final report of the impact of the PIN program on the partners at the local level and upon the field. Simultaneously, the Impact evaluation effort captured local results.

³² While a comprehensive evaluation model was not created prior to the launch of the PIN program, the latter two pieces were in place from the beginning

³³ Ricardo Millett of Ricardo Millett and Associates and Chantell Johnson of TCC group.

³⁴ Sue Hassmiller, Senior Advisor for Nursing; Nancy Fishman, Senior Program Officer; MaryJoan Ladden, Senior Program Officer; and Judith Woodruff, Director of Workforce Development of the Northwest Health Foundation.

and the results of this partnership in terms of the grantmaking model (including the partnership's communication, interaction and supports to grantees). Further, the process evaluation explored the extent to which local partners attributed, in part, the results of their local project efforts to the strength of the RWJF-NWHF partnership.

The process evaluation was framed around the following core belief: PIN's success at the local level was dependent on the successful working relationship at the RWJF-NWHP level. The premise being (as illustrated in Figure A): if the partnership relationship worked, it could optimally translate into efficient and effective partnership management and functioning as well as best practices in grantmaking—which, in turn, could facilitate local partner outcomes.

Informed by a literature review, the process evaluation examined, and assessed a series of indicators related to the partnership between the two primary funders (RWJF and NWHF) including (Evaluation A) each partner's history and characteristics; the partnership purpose, formation and structure; and the partners' readiness, roles and responsibilities, communications, and interactions. Further, the evaluation focused on how these variables and indicators facilitated (or not) the partners' achievement of high quality grantmaking, partnership modeling (Evaluation B) and the facilitation of results at a local level (Evaluation C).

Figure A.

